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WORLD Beirut hostages' fate looms as test for U.S.

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WASHINGTON — The fate of the five American hostages in Beirut is shaping up as a possible test of the U.S. willingness to retaliate directly and violently against terrorism.

A news report last week said contingency plans submitted to President Reagan included — if the terrorists had a proven link to Iran — the bombing of the Iranian city of Qom, seat of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and center of his Shiite fundamentalist sect.

Neither the White House nor the State Department would comment on the report, carried by Hearst News Service, but both asserted vaguely that the United States "will respond with whatever action we deem most appropriate against those responsible for state-supported terrorism."

The Reagan administration consistently has kept open the option of direct retaliation, and has deliberately fed the sense of uncertainty that terrorists now face.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz, last October 25, gave the most concise outline of the administration's counter-terrorism policy when he said: "Our responses should go beyond passive defense to consider means of active prevention, preemption and retaliation.

"Our goal must be to prevent and deter future terrorist acts."

It was a statement deliberately crafted to put terrorists on notice that the United States had the ability and the will to react dramatically if it so decided. But it immediately produced conflict within the administration, with Vice President Bush and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger appearing less ready to use military force than Mr. Shultz. There was brief confusion, but Mr. Reagan eventually appeared to side with Mr. Shultz's firm approach.

The policy has been consolidated through testimony of various officials on Capitol Hill. That policy appears to be heading for an inevitable test, as administration officials predict increasingly violent terrorism with, as Robert B. Oakley, director of the State Department's office for

counter-terrorism and emergency planning, testified to Congress this month, new and "grotesque developments."

During the past two years one-third of the victims of terrorist attacks died.

About one in every three terrorist attacks is aimed at Americans, usually abroad. Most other attacks are made closer to the terrorists' home turf — the Palestine Liberation Organization in Israel, Irish Republican Army in Britain, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Basques in Spain, the Corsican nationalists in France.

Experts feel that while the potential threat inside the United States is real, security measures minimize it and the major danger will remain abroad.

With this as background, the Reagan administration has adopted a clear policy: no concessions to terrorists; no ransoms, prisoner releases, or any actions which might encourage future terrorism, and no changes in policy because of terrorist pressure.

Other governments are encouraged to take equally strong stands, but the United States is careful not to criticize. When Israel swapped 1,150 Palestinians, many of them convicted terrorists, for three Israeli soldiers last week, the State Department reaction was limited to restating U.S. policy rather than questioning Israeli judgment.

If U.S. personnel are victims of terrorism, the administration has a broad range of options, including violent retaliation.

Should the Beirut hostages be killed, recommendations on U.S. retaliatory steps would be made by the Interdepartmental Group on Terrorism, led by the State Department. The list of permanent members reflects the variety of responses that could be called up.

In the group are the vice president's office, the National Security Council, Department of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA, Justice, the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Agency, Treasury, Energy, and the Federal Aviation Administration.

In major crises, such as the September 20 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, the hijacking of a Kuwait airline flight to Iran, and the escape of American journalist Jerry

Levin from his captors in Lebanon, a special task force is created.

Mr. Oakley, in his testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee this month, provided a list of 10 U.S. responses to terrorism:

□ Increased physical security at U.S. embassies and missions abroad, reinforcing buildings, upgrading security equipment, and augmenting armed guards at the most seriously threatened outposts;

□ Establishment of an Emergency Action Plan at every embassy, to be reviewed every two years, with the system in high-threat areas being tested by mock hijackings, bombings and assaults.

□ Educating U.S. personnel overseas, with all government employees required to attend counter-terrorism seminars before they are posted abroad;

□ Close liaison with U.S. overseas business representatives;

□ Sponsoring legislation which strengthens U.S. defenses, including a new program to pay rewards for information on terrorists;

□ Controlling trade with countries known to support terrorism, currently including Cuba, Libya, Syria, Iran, and South Yemen.

□ Monitoring and controlling travel of terrorists and diplomats from countries supporting terrorism;

□ Improving intelligence gathering on terrorist organizations;

□ Dispatching additional manpower, including intelligence officers, psychologists, troops, to site of terrorist incident;

□ Responding militarily.

Said Mr. Oakley: "Selecting the appropriate response to each terrorist act raises many questions. We should not consider it a sign of weakness that a terrorist act might occur without a U.S. military response.

"We must remember that we are a superpower with global interests and responsibilities, and we must recognize that in many cases the disadvantages of military action from the global perspective might outweigh the advantages.

"This does not mean that we are either unable or unwilling to act forcefully, but rather that in most circumstances other sorts of actions might be more appropriate than a military response."